

Mill's Distinction of Higher and Lower Pleasures Revisited¹

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Abstract

The distinction between higher and lower pleasures is one of the most important features of Mill's utilitarianism which marks the divergence of his moral theory from Bentham's. It is also one of the most controversial parts of Mill's utilitarianism. Despite being discussed extensively, the scholarship of Mill's distinction continues developing in recent years. Yet the continuously expanding literature does not seem to help Mill scholars reach satisfactory and widely accepted interpretations. In his book *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*, Henry West argues that Mill's position regarding higher and lower pleasures is in fact a combination of three related yet distinct claims. Following West, this paper further breaks Mill's arguments down to five components and uses them as the framework of analysis. The paper first argues that it is promising to solve some of controversies regarding Mill's distinction by using the findings of neuroscience. Moreover, it assesses the most popular two interpretations of Mill's method of evaluating pleasures and argues that each of the interpretations is partly correct and the combination of the two can best represent Mill's position.

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1. Introduction

The distinction between quality and quantity in pleasures is one of the most important features of Mill's utilitarianism which marks the divergence of his moral theory from Bentham's. It is also one of the most controversial parts of Mill's utilitarianism.

In his book *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*, Henry West draws readers' attention to the fact that Mill's position regarding higher and lower pleasures is a combination of three related yet distinct claims. They are: first, 'there are qualitative differences between pleasures as pleasures'; second, 'some of these are superior to others on grounds of quality'; third, 'the qualitatively superior are those that involve the distinctively human faculties'. According to West, whether each of these claims is true or not does not necessarily affect the validity of others. By separating Mill's arguments for the distinction of higher and lower pleasures, West's analysis makes a significant progress in Mill scholarship. It helps to recognize that the core difficulty in interpreting and evaluating Mill's distinction largely roots in the entanglement of the different elements in his arguments. This entanglement is key to understand why it is so difficult for scholars to engage in an effective dialogue on this topic.

Following West's approach, this paper further breaks down Mill's arguments for the proposition that higher pleasures are more valuable than lower ones into five elements: first, there are qualitative differences between pleasures, merely as pleasures; second, the estimation of pleasures, or which pleasure is more valuable, is determined by both the quantity and quality of the pleasures; third, some qualities are superior and therefore more valuable; four, the judgement of the experienced is the only way to determine whether one pleasure has superiority in quality to another; five, the judgment of the experienced will be that those pleasures derived from the distinctively human faculties are qualitatively superior to those from animal appetites. These five elements entangle in Mill's discussion of quality/quantity distinction. This makes the interpretation and assessment of Mill's position particularly difficult. One may agree with the first element, but not the other four. Or one may agree with the first three elements, but not the last two. Therefore, in order to get an accurate understanding of Mill's view on the quality/quantity distinction, it is helpful to examine his discussion by considering the five elements separately. It is worth noting that the first and last elements have different nature from the other three: they are empirical questions regarding facts while others are evaluative issues. The rest of this paper will first discuss each of the first four elements briefly and then give a more detailed discussion on the fifth element.

2. Are pleasures all the same in quality?

For Mill, quality and quantity are two distinct attributes or properties belonging to pleasure. There are not only quantitative differences between pleasures, but also qualitative differences between pleasures; the former cannot be reduced to the latter. This statement alone is not an ethical norm, but an opinion regarding facts. It follows that whether it is true or not can be and should be tested by empirical evidence.

Mill wrote *Utilitarianism* in the 1860s when the study of psychology still heavily relied on introspection. It is not surprising why Mill's demonstration of the qualitative differences in pleasures, which is grounded in introspection, is difficult to be tested to be true or false. As West commented, disputes resulting from introspection are notoriously difficult to settle and this is the reason why professional psychologists have turned to overt behaviour (West, 2004, p. 53). West seems to suggest that introspection remains to be the only procedure available for the subject of qualitative versus quantitative differences in pleasures. If this is really what West meant, he might neglect the possibility of investigating this subject with different methods offered by today's technology.

The advance of technology has allowed neuroscience to provide evidence which indicates the existence of qualitative differences among pleasures, even though the differences may not be the same thing as what Mill meant. One may disagree with Mill's approach and the evidence he used to demonstrate the claim that there are qualitative differences between pleasures, but the claim itself is true according to today's scientific evidence. Scientists have proved that pleasure is not merely a sensation. It involves a complicated brain activity which 'actively paints an additional "hedonic gloss" onto a sensation to make a pleasant experience "liked"' (Berridge and Kringelbach, 2011). Scientific evidence suggests that the coding of sensory pleasures (such as taste) is processed in an area of brain different from that where pleasures caused by more complex or abstract reinforcers (such as monetary gain and loss) are coded (Berridge and Kringelbach, 2011). It remains unclear how such a fact would change our evaluation of fundamental pleasures and higher pleasures in moral sense, but it does demonstrate that pleasures differ in quality in the sense that they are related to the brain's networks differently. More importantly, the further study of this difference, a promising study suggested by Kringelbach and Berridge (2010) among other scientists, may provide an answer regarding how different types of pleasures contribute to happiness or well-being differently.

The second element of Mill's argument, that is, the evaluation of pleasures should take into account both quality and quantity, will become less controversial if we have better understanding about the nature and properties of pleasures. In other words, whether one accepts the second element will largely depend on whether one sees the first element to be true or not. Whether qualitative differences exist, like whether quantitative differences exist, is a question regarding fact. The question itself is value-neutral. As Wendy Donner suggests, quality is not the synonym of value in Mill's moral theory (Donner, 2006, p. 123; Donner and Fumerton, 2009, p. 21). Nevertheless, once we put pleasures on the scale of value, it is not only reasonable but also necessary to take into account both quality and quantity, that is, both the greater quantity and the superiority in quality are the properties which make a pleasure more valuable. Indeed, if in reality qualitative differences do exist between pleasures and quantity, like quantity, is an intrinsic property of pleasures, why should, as Mill questions, the estimation of pleasures be supposed to depend on quantity alone while the estimation of all other things should depend on both quantity and quality (Mill, *CW*, X: 211)? The burden of argument will not fall on Mill alone but also on those who argue qualitative difference should not be taken into account in the evaluation of pleasures.

As to the third element, namely, the claim that some qualities are superior and therefore more valuable, the statement itself is logical. The problem is how we define superiority. The existence of difference in qualities does not imply that one type of pleasures must be more valuable than others. It is possible that some pleasures differ in quality yet are equally valuable in moral sense. The concept of 'valuable', like the concept of 'good', does not have fix contents. What is valuable, like what is good, depends on the subject under discussion. What is morally valuable should ultimately depend on the nature of human beings.

After breaking down Mill's arguments, we can see that the above three elements should not cause real objections to Mill's distinction of higher and lower pleasures. But the fourth and fifth elements of Mill's quality/quantity distinction do suffer some difficulties which cannot be easily settled, even if Mill's arguments are read in the most charitable manner. When facing two pleasures how can we decide which is greater in quantity or superior in quality? On both dimensions of quality and quantity, Mill considers, only those who are familiar with both pleasures can answer. Moreover, he believes that between pleasures derived from higher faculties and lower ones, the former will be chosen by those who experienced both on the ground of quality.

The fourth element is often criticized for its elitism. Donner (1991, 2009) and Skorupski (2006) disagree with this view and argue that for Mill one gains access to appreciating higher qualities of pleasure by cultivation. Moreover, Mill's views on education and self-development suggest that everyone should be given the chance to cultivate the taste for higher pleasures. Hence, Mill's approach of assessing the value of pleasures is not an elitist one in nature. It is true that some might not be able to gain access to higher pleasures even after cultivation. Yet it is a secondary question. The key issue here is an epistemological one: how can we know if one pleasure is superior to another? For an empiricist like Mill, there is no way other than having experience of those pleasures under comparison. It is more reasonable to treat Mill's arguments as dealing with general experience of human beings as a whole, rather than suggesting methods of measuring specific pleasures on every occasion.

3. The methods of evaluating pleasures

As mentioned earlier, the fifth element is an empirical question in nature. If so, in theory it can be tested by empirical evidence whether the experienced will consider pleasures derived from the distinctively human faculties qualitatively superior to those from animal appetites. However, in practice, such evidence is difficult to collect. This section will first classify the reading of Mill's evaluation of pleasures in the literature into two types. It will then argue that the second interpretation is closer to Mill's position, but it requires the concept of discontinuities in value held by the first interpretation to allow some of Mill's texts in *Utilitarianism* to be reasonably explained. Also, if how people actually evaluate pleasures is the same as the second interpretation of what Mill expects people will do, then it explains why the observable choice or revealed preference of the experienced judge cannot be used to test the validity of the fifth element.

There are two possible readings of Mill's view on the measurement of value. Let's label these two readings as Method 1 and Method 2 respectively and consider the case in which two pleasures are compared:

[Method 1] If one pleasure is superior in quality, then however great the quantity of the other pleasure has, the pleasure of superior quality will be more valuable.

[Method 2] If one pleasure is superior in quality, it will be granted more value on the ground of quality. However, one pleasure's value in quantity can still outweigh the other pleasure's value in quality.

In other words, for Method 1, the superiority in quality will render the consideration of quantity negligible. For Method 2, the value grounded on the quality is not the dominant determinant of the total value. If one pleasure is far greater in quantity than the other, it is still possible that the pleasure of greater quantity can outrank the other so that the total value of the pleasure superior in quality may be less than that of the pleasure greater in quantity.

Mill never spells out the method of evaluating pleasures in either way. His discussion of the quality/quantity distinction is so ambiguous that both readings of evaluation method appear to be compatible with, or at least not obviously contradictory to his texts. Moreover, neither of them can be fully justified by the texts in *Utilitarianism* alone. Nevertheless, Method 2 seems to be a more plausible theory and will lead to a theory of value which fits better in Mill's theory of life in general.

If we combine these two readings of the evaluation method with the proposition that higher pleasures are always superior in quality to lower ones, then we obtain the following two interpretations of Mill's theory of value. Let's label them as Interpretation 1 and 2, corresponding to the above Method 1 and 2:

[Interpretation 1] Higher pleasures are always more valuable than lower ones regardless of their respective quantities, and therefore will always be preferred or ought to be chosen by the competent judge.

[Interpretation 2] Higher pleasures are not always more valuable than lower ones even though they are superior in quality. Therefore, they will not necessarily be preferred or always ought to be chosen by the competent judge.

Both views have strong supporters. Commentators who are in line with Interpretation 1 believe that higher pleasures are not only superior in quality but also superior as a whole. Accordingly, they claim that there is a hierarchy of pleasures in Mill's theory or the values of pleasures are lexically ranked. Riley is the leading figure of this view among others³. Commentators who are in line with Interpretation 2 do not think that there is a rigid hierarchical ranking among pleasures in Mill's theory. Donner is the key figure of this view

³ Riley wrote substantively on this topic. See, Riley 1988, 1993, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010. Brink (1992) and Millgram (2009) are examples of this category. Crisp may be classified as this category as well. He believes that Mill accepts the lexical priority of higher pleasures, although he thinks that Mill is wrong on this point. See, Crisp, 1997, pp. 40-1.

among others⁴.

Which interpretation better presents Mill's position? The debate over this issue is still carrying on in the literature, and sometimes rather bitter. In essence, the core of the debate lies in the disagreement over the answer to the question whether 'the slightest distinctively human pleasure is found more gratifying to the feelings than the greatest pleasure from animal appetite' and whether 'the slightest superiority in quality would outweigh any amount of quantity of an alternative *on every occasion*', framed in West's words (2004, p. 64). The answer of Interpretation 1 to both questions would be positive and that of Interpretation 2 would be negative. The debate between the two views is not merely a pure philosophical speculation. Rather, it has significance in practice for utilitarianism to be adopted as a functional doctrine to provide guidance for public policies. What Interpretation 1 argues for is essentially that higher pleasures always do and ought to trump lower pleasures. It follows that, as a matter of public policy, even a small quantity of higher pleasures for some can never be sacrificed for a very large quantity of lower pleasures for many others.

Some commentators such as West (2004) argue that a theory of value like Interpretation 1 is in effect a very stringent theory and does not seem to be compatible with Mill's theory of life which suggests that a happy life will consist of many and various pleasures. Hence, it is fair to say that Interpretation 2 is closer to Mill's position as a whole, provided the interpretation is supplemented with a crucial condition which, this paper argues, is indispensable to Mill's theory. This condition can be better understood by explaining the notion of discontinuity in value, one of the key arguments of Interpretation 1.

For Interpretation 1 to hold there must be discontinuities in value between pleasures (a notion proposed by Griffin, 1986, p. 85), such that no amount of pleasures that are inferior in quality can ever be that more valuable than some finite amount of pleasures that are superior in quality. It is worth noting that not all scholars who hold the discontinuity view agree on the interpretation of Mill's superiority. For instance, Riley insists that Mill's qualitative superiorities must be interpreted as infinite superiorities while Rabinowicz and Arrhenius argue that Millian superiority does not need to be infinite (Rabinowicz 2003; Arrhenius and Rabinowicz 2005).

⁴ For Donner's discussion on this topic, see Donner 1998, particularly pp. 268-73; 2009, Ch. 1. Despite being diverse in details, Schmidt-Petri and (2003, 2006) and Saunders (2010) can be allocated within this category.

Does Mill's utilitarianism endorse the notion of discontinuity in value? This paper argues that the notion of discontinuity in value can be supported by Mill's discussion of justice, in particular, security. For Mill, justice is 'only a particular kind or branch of general utility' (Mill, *CW X*: 241). However, not every utility is eligible to be a utility of this kind. Justice is a 'name for certain social utilities which are *vastly more important, and therefore more absolute and imperative*, than any others are as a class' (Mill, *CW X*: 259; emphasis added). Security is beyond doubt one of the utilities of this kind, since all other earthly benefits are needed by one person, not needed by another, but no human being can possibly live without security (Mill, *CW X*: 251). As a consequence,

Our notion [...] of the claim we have on our fellow-creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence, gathers feelings around it so much more intense than those concerned in any of the more common cases of utility, that the difference in degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind. The claim assumes that character of absoluteness, that apparent infinity, and incommensurability with all other considerations, which constitute the distinction between the feeling of right and wrong and that of ordinary expediency and in expediency. (Mill, *CW X*: 251)

For Mill, the character of absoluteness, infinity, and incommensurability with all other considerations residing in the feelings gathered around the notion of security provide a foundation for granting those utilities deserving the name of justice a value which cannot never be outstrip by the value of ordinary utilities. This paper argues that this is the key to understand how Mill weighs up the values of different utilities when facing the conflicts of utilities *among different people*.

Interpretation 1 on the notion of discontinuity in value is a reasonable understanding of Mill's concept of utility, but it is questionable to extend this notion so far to suggest lexical priorities among different kinds of pleasures, especially if the lexical ranking is meant to be fixed and complete or presented in a sequence form.

It is worth mentioning that the following passage should not be considered to be able to indicate the discontinuity in value or infinite superiority:

If one of the two [pleasures] is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account. (Mill, *CW X*: 211)

Riley and Schmidt-Petri once had an acrimonious debate over the interpretation of this passage. This paper has no intention to get into their debate here since their arguments are complicated and it is not a suitable place to divert our discussion. Schmidt-Petri's view is not well known yet worth noting. According to Schmidt-Petri, the above passage should not be read as 'if some pleasure is of higher quality, then it will be or ought to be chosen over the pleasure of lower quality regardless of their respective quantities' (Schmidt-Petri, 2003, p. 103). If we read this passage carefully from the context, we will notice that Mill is here not giving a definition or stipulating the necessary or sufficient condition of qualitative superiority. Instead, the purpose of this passage is to propose a way to demonstrate the existence of qualitative difference. All he says in this passage is that if one of the pleasures is preferred in the way as he describes, then we are justified in ascribing to a qualitative superiority to the preferred pleasure. In other words, qualitative superiority can be inferred, but not defined, if competent people would not sacrifice one pleasure for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of. If so, the logic of Mill's argument in this passage is that one pleasure will be preferred because of its qualitative superiority, not *vice versa*, namely one pleasure is qualitatively superior because it is preferred. If this analysis is correct, then the above quotation does suggest the possibility for one pleasure to enjoy superiority in quality which is so far vast that it causes discontinuity in value. However, it is insufficient to infer from the passage that qualitative superiorities will always cause discontinuities in value since in the quotation Mill gives us only one extreme case of qualitative superiority.

4. Conclusions

This paper re-examines Mill's distinction of higher and lower pleasures by breaking down his arguments into five elements and examining each of them. In so doing, the paper argues that Mill's claim that there are qualitative differences in pleasures is a claim regarding facts and can be tested by scientific evidence. This does not imply that the existence of qualitative difference as a fact will endorse Mill's arguments concerning the superiority of higher pleasures to lower ones as a moral theory. However, it does suggest that the study of Mill's distinction could move on from the current purely philosophical discussion to a new state in which the findings of the latest psychological and neuroscientific study can be integrated. The interdisciplinary study of moral philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience is not a new thing. It has been thriving more than a decade. The work of psychologists such as

Richard Davidson, Martin Seligman, Joshua Greene, and Jonathan Cohen has made big contribution to our understanding of moral judgment. This paper suggests that it is promising to make a significant breakthrough if the study of Mill's distinction of higher and lower pleasures can integrate similar scientific studies.

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